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ABSTRACT

A model for assessing student writing achievement uses sets of criteria to chart students' writing progress that are based on a study of exemplary samples of student writing produced at various stages of development. The model provides a viable alternative to assessment methods that call for students to produce lengthy essays on preselected topics in a limited time. Criteria for evaluating narratives based on personal experience are in the form of four questions: (1) What kinds of ordering occur as the writer imaginatively recounts past events? (2) How much audience awareness does the writer demonstrate? (3) How comprehensive is the writer's point of view? and (4) What actual or potential understanding of the uses of language does the writer demonstrate? Applying these criteria to a narrative example demonstrates their usefulness. Possible criteria for evaluating achievement in writing moral or social argument include questions on the complexity, coherence, and integrity of the argument, as well as the degree of the writer's awareness of opposing viewpoints. This analysis is in the spirit of investigations of writing development going on internationally and can contribute to a joint effort among English teachers to replace the old essay exam model. (AEA)

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CHANGING THE MODEL FOR "EXAMINING" ACHIEVEMENTS IN WRITING:

A CASE FOR INTERNATIONAL COLLABORATION?

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For the past hundred years there has been a pattern of believing that you could assess achievement at 16, 17 or any other age by sitting pupils down for a 2-3 hour exam paper with a choice of essay topics.

What are the limitations to this model of assessing writing?

(i) It restricts the kinds of writing sampled to one, or two at the most. The assumption is then made that the student is equally good (or bad) at all other kinds of writing.

(ii) It assesses unprepared writing on an unseen topic, not necessarily of any great interest or concern to the writer. Thus the results rarely if ever represent the potential achievements of the students involved - most of whom appear worse than they are.

(iii) It rules out any kinds of writing that involve the gathering of data, the sifting of other people's opinions, and - in general - the development of a self-selected investigation over a period of time.

(iv) It eliminates redrafting and the kind of revision necessary when ideas and insights develop over time. Indeed, by feedback it suggests that a 45-60 minute burst is the norm in writing.

(v) It does not allow the possibility of writing for a real audience. The material is destined for marking, and then the shredding machine.

So much for the "examination"; the "results" are if anything even less defensible under scrutiny. Out of all their toil and sweat Exam Boards, in general, seem unable to produce publicly a well-developed analysis of the qualities they are expecting, or even a set of examples to demonstrate what counts as "standards". So far as teachers, students and the public are concerned, what is meant by a "pass" or a "grade" remains an ineffable idea in the mind of some chief examiner.

What are the alternatives? Student, teacher and public want to know that, over a period of time, a given individual has developed the ability to write for a range of purposes and audiences. It will be fair to sample the individual's peak achievements over that period, and to ensure that the writing is undertaken in encouraging contexts - with appropriate time, materials and preliminary advice available, and opportunities to revise and develop early drafts. These are the conditions assumed by most writers (including ourselves at this moment).

Over the last ten years or so, a number of Exam Boards in various English-speaking countries have begun to set up systems of assessment on this model. We believe it is time to take stock of their achievements, and to consider the policy implications for the examining of English.

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One of the important effects of their alternative model has been to make available, for the first time, "exemplar" folders of students' writing. These have immediate implications. First, they suggest the kinds of positive achievement that students are capable of, according to their current mastery of language. In effect, they illustrate how imaginative teaching can adapt the tasks suggested, or discussed with the student, to bring out the best in the individual - his or her thinking and imaginative insight into life. The regular termly meetings held with the Board by the participating schools in England are therefore a natural exchange for such ideas in teaching and learning.

These meetings have a further function, too. As folders come to be used to establish - and demonstrate - what is meant by "standards", it is much simpler to involve teachers in the participating schools in the final assessment.

Instead of trying to train them to imagine - and memorise - some ineffable grade "level", the Board can now ask them to match a student's writing against one or other of the exemplar folders. And the ability to do so reliably can more easily be checked.

However, it is the third effect of assessment folders that is likely to be of the greatest long term importance to English teachers. In all production of language, people are capable of succeeding to some degree. What is achieved on one occasion may be more elementary, on another more complex, but both may be of value - and useful. The question, then, is what line(s) of development a teacher may hope for in a given student's writing?

The notion of writing development, of 'staging points' in individual achievement, is still relatively unexplored among English teachers - though it is fundamental to teaching, one would think. Exemplar folders in themselves cannot offer direct evidence of development, of course: however, as one reads through pieces of the same kind at successive grade levels, it does not take much teacherly imagination to recall individual students who have made steps such as are suggested there. And overall, as mastery of an increasing range of writing begins to show, a kind of map emerges on which a teacher might hope to chart the progress of each student.

The feedback from this alternative system of assessment, then, is to challenge the teacher to understand more fully the processes of development (in language, thought and feeling) that underly progress in writing. As an alternative to coaching for a 2-3 hour paper, it seems an indisputable gain.

In order to support the work of the teachers and Boards involved in this alternative approach, the current writers are engaged in a two-stage project. As a first stage we have set ourselves the task of looking in turn at each main kind of writing, trying to point to the features and qualities which characterise clearly distinguishable "staging points" in what is achieved - from the most elementary to the most complex (at 16+).

Our provisional findings to date seem to be entirely in sympathy with the work described at the Ottowa International conference by Andrew Wilkinson, Lee Odell and Bruce Bennett. Indeed we hope to rely on them and other colleagues internationally for the criticism and extension of our current ideas.

Briefly, we have begun by looking at two kinds of writing, narratives based on personal experience, and arguments about moral or social issues.

Let us begin by considering personal narratives.

Narratives based on personal experience.

Telling stories about ourselves and others is one of the early purposes that we all learn to use extended stretches of language for, and it remains vitally important throughout our lives. For a long time teachers of English have recognised the value of getting this kind of experience into words, first in oral story telling and then, additionally, in writing. It is not surprising, therefore, to find this kind of writing forming a regular component of exemplar folders at 16+. Yet, development in using writing to explore and understand personal experience is very uneven by this age. What different kinds of achievements can be expected, and how can they all be described, from the most elementary to the most complex? In this paper we offer a provisional way of answering these key questions, for discussion, criticism and modification.

We have found in close scrutiny of the texts that the following four questions are central to our argument and effectively form a set of criteria:

(a) What kinds of ordering or re-ordering occur as the writer imaginatively recovers the events of the past? - and to what effect? For example, is the sequence retraced in an elementary way, or are there more complex transformations? Are past events re-organised at any point from a later position, with the benefit of hindsight? ...

(b) Is the writer automatically assuming or taking for granted a reader who is already acquainted with the setting, or the characters, or the events? Does s/he implicitly take into account readers without exactly similar experience, and possibly with different attitudes or points of view?

(c) Does the writer remain largely or entirely an unselfconscious egocentric, or is there a more comprehensive perspective in which thoughts and feelings of other participants are more fully acknowledged or realised? (This is a question about the authorial point of view, which may at times be ironically at odds with the "I" of the story.)

(d) What actual or potential understanding of the uses of language could be pointed to as significant? In what ways is the writer beginning to show significant forms of control, technique or awareness in the use of language?

In answering all four questions we hope to be able to show the set of features in the language which support or validate our judgements. We realise that answers to any one question frequently interlock with the answers to others. Nevertheless, in analysing our examples we shall follow this framework, for the reader's convenience, indicating the focal questions in shorthand form.

There is time to look at just one narrative example today. It may well be that this represents a bridging point between an elementary stage in narrative that is very close to adolescent oral story telling, and the development of a more complex extension into kinds of writing that are closer to literature.

My First Date

My friend and I were sitting down at the Youth club. We were very bored and were just staring at the pictures on the wall.

All of a sudden my eyes caught two girls whom I had not seen before, they were both about John's and my age and were good looking.

Then John gave me a nudge and said, "Have you seen those two girls who have just come in?"
"Yes", I replied.
"Wonder what their names are", I said enquiringly"
"Come on lets find out", was John's answer to that.

John was not very talkative when it came to girls so I could see I was the one who would have to do all the talking on our part. So I started the conversation with the girls by asking them if they wanted a drink, but then I felt a little bit stupid when I saw that they already had drinks. But I pretended not to notice and they replied, "No thanks".

The girls had different coloured hair and one was a little smaller than the other but the both looked the same other wise.

Our first advance on them did not seem to work, so I interupted their conversation once more and asked their names. The taller of the two answered my question.
"My name's Julie and my friend's name is carol, whats your names?"
"My name's Steve and this is John".
Just then the lights in the Youth Club flickered which was the sign that the Youth Club was about to close.

The two girls were just about to leave the the bar, so I asked them if we could walk them home. they both smiled and said "Yes".
But as they answered I wondered what I had done, what if they lived miles away, So I quickly said.
"Where do you live?"
Julie answered and said,
"Not far we only live on the Manor".
I felt a bit of relief as it was not too far from where John and I lived.

So we set off from the Youth Club, with the two girls walking in front of us.

Then John asked me which of the girls I liked best, and I replied,
"I like both of them",
John replied.
"Well you are not going out with both of them.
"I wish you would not be so daft", I said,
"What I really mean is that I like both of them but I only want to go out with one of them".

I told John to go and ask them if they would go out with us, When he came back, he said they would and we need not choose between them as they had chosen already. I was to go out with Julie.

As we arrived near their homes we left John and Carol because Julie lived on the next road from Carol.

I stood with Julie outside their house and started talking. I asked her which school she went to and all that.

Julie asked me if I was coming out the following night, and I said that John and I would see them at the Youth Club at about half past seven, Julie said, "I will have to go now", so we kissed and she went in.

I met up with John further up the road and we both agreed it was a night well spent.

What kinds of ordering? The events are recreated in a sustained and coherent story, stretching well beyond what is usually expected in gossip. The main sequence accurately retraces the chronological order of events, but, in this case, interwoven with the sequence are some of the narrator's thoughts and feelings at the time. These look forward and back, interpreting sections of the action from the narrator's then point of view. Thus, "John was not very talkative when it came to girls" explains the narrator's taking the initiative, while "Our first advance on them did not seem to work" sums up what has just happened, and prompts a new action. (The difficulty with tense suggests that the writer is still learning to master this kind of feature.) As a result the story begins to fall into episodes, sections with their own internal coherence and interpreted significance. It is in keeping with this that the narrator ends with the overall rounding-off comment (then): "we both agreed it was a night well spent". The sentiment may seem rather formal (18th century?) but the intention is clear. Narrative is felt to be not a skeleton of events but significant action ("As they answered I wondered what I had done".) The narrator is beginning to interpret life, as it occurs.

How comprehensive a perspective? Beginning with "My friend and I" is not necessarily a sign of egocentricity, of course: an author may deliberately postpone the characterisation of his personae in such a story, if s/he chooses. However, in this case, there is evidence to suggest that that wasn't the reason. The girls, for instance, "had different coloured hair and one was a little smaller than the other but they both looked the same other wise". Admittedly, he could have been bowled over, incapable of registering detail, but the use of "different" and "the same" betrays an egocentric participant rather than a deliberate author, we would say.

There is further clear evidence of unconscious egocentricity when the pronouns shift without warning: "As we arrived near their homes we left John and Carol". The first "we" is "John and I" (possibly plus the two girls), whereas the second is "Julie and I".

What sort of readers? There are mixed impressions here. An author who refers to "the Youth Club" and "the Manor" seems to be assuming that his reader is familiar with the places intended. On the other hand, he does realise that when the lights flicker he needs to explain that this "was the sign that the Youth Club was about to close".

Similarly when his comments reveal his own gaucheness ("I felt a little bit stupid when I saw they already had drinks", or "I wondered what I had done, what if they lived miles away"), the reader can't help wondering whether the author (now) isn't a shade amused at what he did then. Nevertheless, overall

the external reader would probably like to have had more from the author (as against the participant): a fuller sense of the people involved, the settings, and the interactions.

It's a story that rings true, seems faithful to the events and perhaps unselfconsciously betrays more than the author is aware of.

What significant uses of language? Here again there is an interesting mixture. Let's look in more detail at the way the story moves at times, the sequence from the opening of the story to the girls' "no thanks", for example. There is something very elementary about the pattern:

My friend and I	were sitting
We	were very bored, and
we	were just staring ...
two girls	not seen before
they	were both about John's and my age and
(they)	were good looking

This is a characteristic use of language. Sections of the narrative are built up of sequences of simple statements such as these; there is one nugget of new information (5) per clause, as if an accretive method was being used to add one simple unit on to the next. Is it an elementary way of maintaining control of the organising, both in terms of the language and in terms of the experience? Maybe this results in the set towards simple chronological ordering of events that we find in this piece - and many others like it.

We have found only one point where the author explicitly shows contemporaneity of events ("as they answered, I wondered what I had done").

The accretive method gives the writing in part the feeling of speech. Yet there are also - by way of contrast - noticeable literary echoes, suggesting a wider repertoire the writer may be learning to draw on:

- said enquiringly
- was John's answer to that
- our first advance on them

Phrases such as these suggest a certain formality of style, an impression supported by the fact that, where we might expect ellipsis, redundant information is retained:

- Just then the lights in the Youth Club flickered, which was the sign that the Youth Club was about to close.

The odd thing is that there is some veering between informal and formal style. For example, ellipsis is in fact nicely used to suggest informal speech:

- Wonder what their names are?

Is this a writer still trying to master the degree of formality and relationship with the reader that he wants to set up in this kind of writing?

Certainly, within the limits that he sets himself, he is a confident handler of the written medium. The sentence is clearly recognised, spelling

has been mastered, and detailed quotations from speech are handled with ease. In addition the episodic structure of the story is clearly indicated by paragraphs. (By contrast the first story was seen as one continuous episode.)

In all, are we seeing a writer with limited but developing perceptions about his own experience, using his linguistic resources at full stretch? (The folder helps to answer such a question.)

Questions about progress.

Let us imagine for the moment that this was a peak achievement of the writer during his sixteenth year. If so, we want to find out what lies behind that student at earlier stages in his development in personal narrative, and what may lie immediately ahead if the right opportunities occur. The types of feature that seem central to describing his current "staging point" suggest, as you see, that stories of this kind will give clues about broader forms of personal maturity. This does not make English teaching any easier - it would be simpler to return to coaching in the rhetorical skills needed for five paragraph, routine essays. Nevertheless, if English teaching may be concerned with things of such importance, isn't it more worthwhile?

Moral argument.

We turned to moral and social argument next because it seemed, like narrative, of central importance in the intellectual and emotional development of students. Clearly it has a vital role in many subjects besides English; nevertheless we suggest that moral argument is inevitably of concern to the English teacher - one has only to think of the moral and social issues infused in literature. Interestingly enough, though, the qualities to be looked for when students take up moral issues in their writing do not seem to have been considered in the same depth as those in narrative.

At this point, then, our position is more provisional; what we offer is a discussion of the characteristics that might be expected in a "mature" moral argument.

Possible criteria for assessing development in argument

In a relatively hierarchical and static society it may be felt that many of the major moral issues are clear cut and the answers given. However, in a rapidly changing society such as our own, traditional moral viewpoints are constantly being challenged and reconsidered. It's therefore essential that, particularly in adolescence, young students are given the opportunity to reflect on such issues and argue them through. What are the qualities of mind - of thought, attitude, insight and language - that the teacher of English might be hoping to encourage, in helping students to argue rationally and to some effect? Any moral or social question worth arguing about inevitably involves a range of issues, not all of them by any means well formulated by the opinion makers of our society. So a first question might be: how <u>complex</u> is the student's construction of what might be at issue, and what range of aspects is s/he at present conscious of and taking account of?

This question emphasises the need to move beyond an egocentric simplification of the problem, and to recognise that there may be opposing, even conflicting, interests. This calls for sympathetic penetration and analysis.

A second, and parallel, question is concerned with the coherence of the student's construction. How well does s/he interrelate the various cross-currents and achieve some overview that acknowledges the complexity they suggest? To tackle this calls for intelligent synthesis and shaping.

Of course, there is argument that is carried on for sheer enjoyment, where an essential aim is to score points off your opponent - as in formal debate. The kind of argument, however, which we are presently considering is usually only undertaken from a concern to come to terms with problems that seem to the student profound and far-reaching in their consequences. So a third question arises: what signs of commitment and integrity can one discern in the written argument? Even if we disagree with the writer, can we take him or her seriously and, in part or as a whole, respect their genuine concern to understand? A further test of the writers' genuine concern is their willingness to acknowledge the implications which follow from the positions they are arriving at.

What we have assumed so far is a student working out a personal viewpoint, possibly with little or no awareness of the views already expressed by other people. When the student has to take account of other people's constructions of the problem, new demands have to be met. This leads to a further set of questions: How carefully does the writer consider the variety of opposing viewpoints and arguments? In doing so, is the writer prepared to acknowledge, or even concede, elements of an opponent's position that seem to deserve it? How well and appropriately does s/he counter opposing viewpoints, assumptions and arguments?

Finally, written argument can take the form of a search to find an answer worth having (with the emphasis on process), so the moral task may not necessarily be completed: the writer may end with further questions, feeling that something has been gained, but having to acknowledge tentativeness and perhaps some uncertainty. This may have happened only too rarely in the past in the English classroom but it seems an important fact of life.

Equally, the writer may feel that a more complex understanding has been reached and wish to communicate this to others (an emphasis on product).

What remains to be done:

We are currently testing these initial criteria against samples of students' writing and hope shortly to publish research reports on this work. Moreover, these are just two of a wider range of kinds of writing. We are already confident that existing exemplar folders by no means realise the sort of range that may be possible. This calls for a second stage in our investigation, when we shall be working with groups of teachers in a form of action research.

In presenting these early ideas to the international conference, then, we are particularly hoping to contact research groups and teacher study groups in other parts of the world who would wish to exchange research papers and - if possible - offer detailed criticism of our own papers. Better still, if this kind of analysis is, as we believe, in the spirit of other investigations of writing development already going on internationally, we wonder if the moment has come for some kind of joint effort among teachers of English to replace the old exam model by the far more valuable task of charting students' progress.

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